United Nations A/61/PV.89

General Assembly

Sixty-first session

Official Records

89th plenary meeting
Monday, 26 March 2007, 10 a.m.
New York

President: Ms. Al-Khalifa ..... (Bahrain)

In the absence of the President, Mr. Chidyausiku (Zimbabwe), Vice-President, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 10.30 a.m.

Agenda item 155 (*continued*)

Commemoration of the two-hundredth anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade

The Acting President: This morning the General Assembly will hold a special meeting devoted to the commemoration of the two-hundredth anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, in accordance with its resolution 61/19 of 28 November 2006.

Before we proceed, I should like to invite members of the Assembly to stand and observe one minute of silence in memory of the victims of the transatlantic slave trade.

The members of the Assembly observed a minute of silence.

The Acting President: I have the honour to make the following statement on behalf of the President of the General Assembly at its sixty-first session. The President deeply regrets that she is not able to be here in person to celebrate such an important event, as she is currently on an official visit to the Middle East.

> "The transatlantic slave trade stands as one of the most inhuman enterprises in history. It began in the fifteenth century when European kingdoms were able to expand overseas and reach Africa. It is a deplorable fact of history that the slave trade was driven by colonial expansion, emerging capitalist economies and the insatiable demand for commodities, with racism and discrimination serving to legitimatize the trade.
>
> "Powerful businessmen, diplomats, church leaders, senior politicians, lawyers and merchants were among those who owned plantation slaves in the eighteenth century before the trade was outlawed. Fortunes were made and financial institutions flourished on the back of human bondage. Capital gained from the slave trade was reinvested in the tobacco and sugar industries, or in art, property and land. The wealthy became influential from their investments, and slavery became an accepted part of the political economy of the time.
>
> "Demand for African labour grew as the colonies grew. The forced removal of millions of people due to the transatlantic slave trade had a major effect on Africa. Africa was impoverished while it contributed to the capitalist development and wealth of Europe and other parts of the world. African traders such as Antera Duke and powerful tribal leaders also enslaved Africans and sold them to merchants. Some African rulers resisted the devastation — most notably King Alfonso of Kongo in the sixteenth century, Queen Njingha Mbandi of Ndongo in the seventeenth century and King Agaja Trudo of Dahomey in the eighteenth century.

This record contains the text of speeches delivered in English and of the interpretation of speeches delivered in the other languages. Corrections should be submitted to the original languages only. They should be incorporated in a copy of the record and sent under the signature of a member of the delegation concerned to the Chief of the Verbatim Reporting Service, room C-154A. Corrections will be issued after the end of the session in a consolidated corrigendum.

07-28237 (E)

"The date of 25 March 2007 marks 200 years to the day that a parliamentary bill was passed to abolish the slave trade in the then British Empire. That event marked the beginning of the end for the transatlantic traffic in human beings. However, it was not until 1833 that the act emancipating British slaves was finally passed. It is hard to believe that what would now be a crime against humanity was legal at that time.

"The bicentenary offers us all a chance to say how profoundly disgraceful the slave trade was and to remember the millions who suffered. It also gives us an opportunity to pay tribute to the courage and the moral conviction of all those who campaigned for abolition. Those people included slaves and former slaves such as Olaudah Equiano, church leaders and statesmen such as William Wilberforce, Thomas Clarkson and Granville Sharp, and countless ordinary citizens who lobbied for the change. Later in France, Victor Schoelcher campaigned relentlessly, which contributed to the French decree abolishing slavery on 27 April 1848.

"While reflecting on the past we also need to acknowledge the unspeakable cruelty that exists today. Slavery comes in many guises around the world, such as bonded labour, the forced recruitment of child soldiers, human trafficking and the illegal sex trade. The first article of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights reminds us that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. Today's commemoration marking the bicentenary of the act of abolition of the transatlantic trade in slaves must also encourage us all to live up to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and to redouble our efforts to stop human trafficking and all forms of modern slavery."

I now give the floor to Her Excellency Asha-Rose Migiro, Deputy Secretary-General.

The Deputy Secretary-General: I am moved to be with the General Assembly this morning in commemorating the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade 200 years ago. Let me thank the Assembly for making this commemoration happen, and in particular the Caribbean Community caucus of permanent representatives to the United Nations.

The story of the end of the transatlantic slave trade must always be remembered here at the United Nations. Our Charter speaks of fundamental human rights and the dignity and worth of the human person. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that no one shall be held in slavery or servitude.

For centuries, the transatlantic slave trade inflicted unspeakable dehumanization. Millions perished from the long march in Africa, the Middle Passage across the Atlantic and conditions at the other end. Millions were brutally exploited in the Americas. Their labour helped build prosperous societies in which they had no rights and no say.

But if slavery epitomized inhumanity at its most callous, many rejected and fought it. Slaves rose up against their subjugation. Abolitionist movements sprung up. The emancipation of slaves was a triumph for all humankind, for it spoke of the inherent equal worth of human beings everywhere.

Today as we commemorate the bicentennial of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade we celebrate the fact that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. Yet around the world millions of people are still deprived of the most fundamental human rights and freedoms. There should be no place in the twenty-first century for trafficking, forced labour or sexual exploitation. There should be no place for mass rape and other war crimes perpetrated against the most vulnerable in times of armed conflict. Children should not be forced to become soldiers or to work in sex shops, nor should they be sold by their families. The fact that these atrocities take place in our world today should fill us all with shame.

So let us not only look back on a tragic period of human history; let us shine a light on the crimes against humanity that are taking place today in the shadows all around us. And let us work to prevent them from happening in the future. I urge Member States to take action by adopting and implementing relevant international instruments such as the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children.

I also urge the Member States to join the Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking, launched today

in London by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. The Initiative brings together a broad partnership of Governments, the United Nations family, civil society, the private sector and the media in an effort to generate the political will, resources and global awareness needed to fight the scourge of trafficking.

Taking action is not only our legal obligation — it is our moral duty. It is a debt that we owe to all those we honour today. Two hundred years ago courageous women and men around the world stood up for freedom. Today, we must do the same. We must act together to stop crimes that deprive countless victims of their liberty, dignity and human rights. We must combat impunity with unwavering commitments. We must mobilize political will through domestic and international pressure. We must apply relentless and continued scrutiny.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am grateful for your contribution to this global cause.

The Acting President: The Assembly will now hear a statement by His Excellency Mr. Denzil Douglas, Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, Sustainable Development, Information and Technology, Tourism, Culture and Sports of Saint Kitts and Nevis, who will speak on behalf of the Caribbean Community.

Mr. Douglas (Saint Kitts and Nevis): It is with a mixed of both humility and pride that I stand here on behalf of the federation of Saint Kitts and Nevis and the other member States of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) to address this body at such an auspicious juncture in its 61-year history. This date certainly represents a milestone of historic proportions in the evolution of our own Caribbean region.

For those of us from the Caribbean, from Africa, Latin America and the United States of America, the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade 200 years ago signalled the end of the barbaric and horrendous practice of the legal trafficking in human cargo. Millions perished during the trade and millions more were subjected to lives of despair, brutality, rape and humiliation. The continents of Africa, North America, South America and Europe were inextricably linked by this appalling practice. It had a global effect on countries and peoples throughout the world in one form or another.

It was not only in the CARICOM region where this inhumane practice occurred and was eventually abolished. Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Brazil, Venezuela, the entire Latin American region, the United States of America, Mauritius and Seychelles — we are all linked with Africa through the slave trade and its abolition.

The transatlantic slave trade created economic growth for only some countries. Coupled with the institution of slavery, it ushered in and heightened the notion of racism throughout those countries affected by slavery and the trade. The slave trade was much more than an economic practice. It violated the basic moral laws of human interaction.

For the Caribbean community today, memories of the slave trade touch the very core of our societies. Many of us are the descendants of those unfortunate people who survived the journey of the Middle Passage. It was a crime against the humanity of our forefathers and a violation of their human rights. We feel very strongly that their suffering should never be forgotten, and we are indeed heartened by the very strong show of support demonstrated by the international community during the unanimous adoption of General Assembly resolution 61/19 last November and by today's commemoration.

It is commendable, therefore, that leaders of some of the former colonial Powers have expressed deep sorrow on several occasions over the role their countries played in the despicable slave trade. It is my fervent hope that leaders of other nations that supported and profited from the inhumane activity will come forward in like manner. However, it is important that leaders of such nations offer to the descendants of African slaves who were brought to the Caribbean and the Americas a complete and unequivocal apology.

It is undisputed that such nations were developed on the blood, sweat and tears of our enslaved forefathers, and it is only right, and the decent thing to do, that they make amends and extend their apologies into the realm of atonement for the legal and economic support and the atrocities that were the norm of the slave trade and slavery. Countries that engaged in the slave trade and slavery have a moral obligation to make right those crimes against humanity.

It has been argued that no country that was engaged in the slave trade and slavery could justifiably claim to support human rights without first offering an

official apology and atonement in the form of reparation. It is further believed that only under such circumstances can the descendants of slaves truly forgive and move forward in the world. From the perspective of the people of the Caribbean, the descendants of slaves, these two matters will remain crucial for us because of the indignity, suffering and haunting legacies we live with as a result of the slave trade and slavery.

Following the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, the Caribbean region underwent a variety of changes. With the abolition of slavery, 27 years later there was no longer a steady supply of African labour, and that ushered in a period of a new form of migration to the region in the form of indentured labour. The region went on to evolve into the diversified society that it is today, with citizens of African, European, Indian, Asian and Arab descent.

As societies of the Caribbean region evolved following decades of migration, decolonization and development, the region remained aware that many of the stereotypes, misconceptions and prejudices that exist today are remnants of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery.

As we commemorate this two-hundredth anniversary today, we must remain steadfast in our efforts to fully eradicate the scourges that continue to plague our world. I speak of the scourges of human rights violations, racism, human trafficking and underdevelopment.

Just as we are linked through the slave trade and its abolition, we must now all work together to resolve and defeat these problems. We all need to recall our linkages and to work together to correct the ills that remain from that legacy, as well as the many ills that exist today.

Let us not forget the sacrifices made by those who fought so valiantly for the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. The successful Haitian revolution of 1804; the countless revolts by slaves, including the Maroons; the humanitarian intervention of William Wilberforce and others; and the changing attitudes of populations as a whole — these all brought about the movement and the eventual abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, and, of course, eventually, of slavery.

CARICOM is committed to ensuring that a permanent memorial in honour of those who perished under slavery is prominently placed in the halls of the United Nations as an acknowledgement of the tragedy and in consideration of the legacy of slavery.

We have established a CARICOM fund towards the achievement of this project, and we are deeply grateful to the Government of the State of Qatar, which was the first to contribute towards it. We are also grateful to our other friends in the United Nations that have indicated their intention to support us in that regard. I take this opportunity to invite other Members of the United Nations family to join those of us from the Caribbean region. It is CARICOM's belief that a permanent memorial in the United Nations will help to ensure that future generations will always be reminded of the history of slavery and of the lessons learned.

In conclusion, I take this opportunity to make special mention of the valuable support that we have received from our many friends around the world. In particular, I would like to thank the United Nations; the Schomburg Centre for Research in Black Culture, here in New York; and UNESCO for their full support and for the launch of the exhibition entitled "Lest We Forget", which opened on 1 March at the United Nations. Although we have come a long way, much more remains to be done to overcome the lasting effects of that crime against humanity.

I believe that this is possible. In fact, I am confident that, with the same fervour that was exhibited more than 200 years ago, and with the very same dedication we are witnessing here this morning, we can right the ship of compassion; overcome the storms of discrimination, prejudice, intolerance and indifference; and eventually sail into a bright future promoting and protecting human rights and human dignity for all of humankind.

The Acting President: I give the floor to the representative of South Africa, who will speak on behalf of the African Group.

Mr. Kumalo (South Africa): Slavery may have been about the sale and subjugation of Africans, but its impact was felt throughout the entire African continent. To this day, the waters of the Atlantic Ocean are said to remain dark and murky with the blood of Africans stolen from all along the western coast, as far south as the windy coast of Namibia and all the way to the dry shores of the Sahara desert. Whenever the slaves

revolted or became seasick, or in any way disobeyed their captors, they were dumped into the icy Atlantic Ocean.

Two hundred years later, Africa is still nursing the wounds of slavery. It is an undisputed fact that the slave traders robbed our continent of its best people. But, even worse, the powerful backers of the slave trade returned to unleash upon those remaining behind an unequalled kind of oppression, driven by greed and expansionism, which manifested itself as a colonial system that left Africa impoverished for centuries.

The General Assembly, in its resolution on the commemoration of the two-hundredth anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, recalled that the slave trade and the legacy of slavery are at the heart of the profound social and economic inequality, hatred, bigotry, racism and prejudice which continues to have an impact, whether direct or psychological, on people of African descent throughout the world.

At the historic World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, held in 2001 at Durban, South Africa, Member States acknowledged that

> "slavery and slave trade are a crime against humanity and should always have been so, especially the transatlantic slave trade, and are among the major sources and manifestations of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, and that Africans and people of African descent, Asians and people of Asian descent and indigenous peoples were victims of these acts and continue to be victims of their consequences" (*A/CONF.189/12, para. 13*).

As the world marks the halfway point in the process of the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, set for 2015, it has become clear that Africa may be the only continent lagging behind in the area of the eradication of extreme poverty. The World Trade Organization (WTO) Doha development round, which could potentially result in the easing of market access for African trade, is currently being held hostage by some of the countries whose wealth was built on the profits of slavery and on the benefits of African colonialism. Statistics suggest that a cow in Europe receives a far greater subsidy than an African child receives in development aid. Many developed nations continue to renege on agreed global commitments to eradicate poverty, including meeting the target of 0.7 per cent of their gross national product in development assistance.

As we commemorate the end of the transatlantic slave trade and honour the memory of those who died in the middle passage or in the resistance and revolt against enslavement, our resolve to value human life, regardless of colour, sex or creed, remains unshaken. We value human life, whether of the descendants of former slaves or of those of former slave owners.

Perhaps no one captured this spirit better than world-renowned American poet Phillis Wheatley, who lived from 1753 to 1784. In fact, Miss Whitley, who was born in Senegal, West Africa, was captured and sold into slavery at the age of 7, like the many other children who were part of the slave trade and have yet to be acknowledged by history. In 1760, Miss Wheatley was sold to the Wheatley family in Boston, Massachusetts, whose name she was given. As part of the Wheatley household, Phillis was given extensive home education by her owners, including in Latin, Greek and biblical studies. She wrote her first poem at the age of 13. Her specialty was composing poems celebrating the lives of her owners and their wealthy friends in the high Boston society of the day. She gained great prominence and fame in 1770, when she wrote a poetic tribute to the well-known Calvinist George Whitefield. Many doubted that such a young person, especially an African slave, could have written it by herself, so a group of Boston luminaries led by John Hancock — whose signature six years later on the United States Declaration of Independence was to distinguish him forever — was organized to check if Phillis had really written it. John Hancock and his fellow luminaries confirmed that, indeed, a slave girl from Senegal had written the poem.

Before long, Phillis Wheatley had produced enough poems to fill a book. However, no American publisher would accept a manuscript written by a slave. Phillis' owners took the manuscript to London, where it was published, together with her other, later works. Among the admirers of this young slave from Senegal was none other than General George Washington, who later became the first President of the United States of America.

Her writing career ended when John and Susanna Wheatley died and Phillis was freed to marry a free black grocer, named John Peters. Phillis spent the rest

of her life working as a domestic and died in poverty in December 1784.

In honour of this day, allow me to conclude with the only poem Miss Wheatley ever wrote about her capture into slavery. It is entitled simply *On Being Brought from Africa to America*. It reads:

> "'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
> Taught my benighted soul to understand
> That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:
> Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
> Some view our sable race with scornful eye —
> 'Their colour is a diabolic die.'
> Remember, Christians, Negroes black as Cain,
> May be refined, and join th'angelic train."

Finally, on behalf of the African Group, may I thank our brothers and sisters from the Caribbean nations for ensuring that this commemoration would take place so that we can never forget. Today we claim, in the words of Phillis Wheatley, that we are, indeed, refined and on an angelic train on a journey towards achieving a better life for all.

The Acting President: I give the floor to the representative of Myanmar, who will speak on behalf of the Group of Asian States.

Mr. Swe (Myanmar): I have the honour to speak on behalf of the Asian Group on this historic occasion. The Asian Group joins the others in paying tribute to Africa, the African people and their descendants in the Caribbean and the Americas for their triumphant struggle against slavery, as they celebrate this special day of commemoration of the two hundredth anniversary of the abolition of transatlantic slave trade.

Theirs is a story that exposes one of the most appalling periods in human history. It is also the story of human resilience, courage and survival. For nearly five centuries, millions of Africans — men, women and children — were transformed into human cargoes, transported across the Atlantic and forced to work in inhuman conditions of horror, deprivation and violence. They were seized in wars and raids, sold from one trader to another, imprisoned in forts and loaded onto ships that took them across the Atlantic. Many perished in that infamous Middle Passage. On their arrival in the new world, the survivors were put in camps where they were tortured into obedience. They worked in plantations and other places in harsh working conditions. Not knowing anything but hard labour and inhuman treatment, many died without ever seeing either their homeland or their families again.

The slave trade destroyed not only the people who were forced into servitude, but also the fragile local economies and societies in Africa by robbing them of a productive sector. The dark chapter of inhuman history came to a close in 1807, when the British Parliament passed the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act. That also marked the beginning of the 200-year struggle for recognition, atonement and the right to be free from the discrimination that 500 years of slavery left on societies.

Although it has taken us 200 years to commemorate that historic day, the United Nations and the world community has made notable progress in recent years to address the negative impact of slavery. In 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights reaffirmed, in article 1, that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights", while article 4 states that "No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms."

We must take into account that we now have new forms of slavery. The 2001 Durban Declaration — an outcome of the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, held in South Africa — pronounced slavery and the slave trade to be crimes against humanity. UNESCO resolution 31 C/28 proclaimed 2004 as the International Year to Commemorate the Struggle against Slavery and its Abolition. General Assembly resolution 61/19 marked another milestone by commemorating the two hundredth anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade.

We cannot change the past, but we can shape the future. We must ensure that succeeding generations learn the truth, act upon those lessons learned and remain vigilant so that no human being suffers the same fate — because, as I said earlier, we are now seeing new forms of slavery.

Joining in this commemorative ceremony, the Asian Group is paying tribute to the people of Africa and their descendants in their heroic struggle for freedom and honour. We pay homage to and remember those who died in the brutal system and those who gave their lives in the fight for freedom. Our tribute also goes to the descendents of the African people who, through pride, love of their people, resilience and

courage, not only survived their ordeals but are now building societies that are rich with their unique cultural heritage.

We would also like to pay tribute to the people of the Caribbean, the States members of the Caribbean Group, who have made today's event possible.

Finally, let this day of commemoration reminds us that, by reason and conscience, we must not allow history to repeat itself in any form or manifestation.

The Acting President: I give the floor to the representative of Georgia, who will speak on behalf of the Group of Eastern European States.

Mr. Alasania (Georgia): I am honoured to address this special meeting of the General Assembly on the two hundredth anniversary of the abolition of transatlantic slave trade on behalf of the Group of Eastern European States.

The spring of 1807, two hundred years ago, marked the beginning of a new era and a new international order. As a result of the wisdom and humanity of outstanding statesmen in the United Kingdom and the United States and their appreciation of universal values, legislation was adopted to ban the slave trade — undisputedly one of the worst violations of human rights. This anniversary is a time to honour the memory of those who died as a result of slavery and the related practices and to acknowledge that its legacies — human trafficking and other contemporary forms of slavery, racism, xenophobia and bigotry — continue to affect people of various racial backgrounds on all continents.

Unfortunately, despite the abolition of the slave trade, some of its altered forms still exist today. Although it is no longer legal for people to be traded as commodities, millions of people are still forced by poverty to work and live in slavery-like conditions. Despite the efforts of the international community to fight slavery, contemporary forms of that vice, from forced labour to human trafficking, are flourishing. The current demand for slaves, the ineffective prosecution of criminals and inadequate protection of labour rights are also contributing to the growth of modern-day slavery. Furthermore, nearly every continent is afflicted by armed conflicts, which produce yet other sources of suffering, including death, destruction and the use of children in armed conflicts.

When one has problems obtaining adequate food, housing and education, one becomes a victim of a new form of slavery. Because of our failure to alleviate poverty, to eliminate the demand for modern-day slaves, to defend the human rights of all and to effectively address impunity, potential victims are unable to protect themselves against exploitation and abuse. Most of the time, our efforts are not sufficient. Despite all that has been accomplished, we still have much to do together.

I would like to end my statement with the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who said that the hope of a secure and liveable world lies with disciplined non-conformists who are dedicated to justice, peace and brotherhood. He also said that our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter. I believe that together we can end despair and build a world with equal opportunities for all.

Mr. Mérorès (Haiti) (*spoke in French*): In my capacity as Chairman of the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States, I have the honour to join the heads of delegations and other speakers who have come here to the United Nations — promoter of human rights — to commemorate the two-hundredth anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. By so doing, we are paying tribute to the millions of sons and daughters of Africa who perished during the passage.

The slave trade is one of the most tragic and barbaric chapters in the history of humanity. Africa, like America, will bear the scars of slavery for a long time to come. While the darkness of the slave trade triumphed for many centuries, the unspeakable atrocities of that aberration of history debased those who committed them and dehumanized those who endured them. We must thus energetically and vehemently condemn those humiliating and racist acts and restore dignity to the victims and their descendants.

Resolution 61/19 of 28 November 2006, in which the General Assembly designated 25 March 2007 as the International Day for the Commemoration of the Two-hundredth Anniversary of the Abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and decided to observe it today, reflected once again the Organization's efforts to recognize slavery and the slave trade as a crime against humanity. Here, the States members of the Caribbean Community, which have been the most ardent

promoters of this event, deserve our commendation and gratitude.

The Group of Latin American and Caribbean States welcomes all the relevant actions of the international community, particularly the outcomes of the 2001 Durban Conference and the UNESCO's proclamation of 2004 as the International Year to Commemorate the Struggle against Slavery and its Abolition. Those are obviously indispensable tools, based on consensus, in the fight to ensure the triumph of the ideals of freedom, justice and respect for the inalienable rights of human beings. The fight against slavery in all its new forms is a never-ending road before us. It is a long-term fight that must be carried out to achieve the ultimate goal of the emergence of a better, more just and more equitable world. It is a fight that must be universal.

In the nineteenth century, the trailblazers of freedom — who, by the way, were products of the transatlantic slave trade — rose up as pioneers in the defence of sacred human rights and broke the infamous yoke of slavery. Throughout America, particularly in 1804, in Santo Domingo — which later became Haiti — following the first revolution against colonialism and slavery, those men, including Toussaint L'Ouverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Alexandre Pétion, Henri Christophe and others, plowed out paths of glory and bequeathed to humanity the universal values of freedom, equality and fraternity. Those values flourished and spread abroad like sparks of light. They introduced a new consciousness to the world and inspired liberators as heroic as Francisco de Miranda, Simón Bolívar and José Martí.

The enlightened, humanistic and philanthropic persons throughout the world who, through their actions or their writings, embraced and defended this noble cause of respect for human dignity — particularly William Wilberforce, Kaplan, Victor Schoelcher, Victor Hugo, John Brown, Frederick Douglass and others — deserve humanity's admiration and our gratitude.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we have the duty of remembrance so that the world will never again experience this abominable form of dehumanization and so that it is not perpetuated under other guises that we would call modern slavery. According to the United Nations, on all the continents where forced labour still exists, more than 20 million persons are its victims. To that, we must add abject poverty, in which many of our fellow human beings languish. Such poverty is a direct corollary of our world's social inequalities and of development delayed by centuries of slavery, colonialism and plundering of resources.

Today, 26 March 2007, far from being a commemoration of the end of the fight, should be a time for joint reflection about how far we have come, how far we still have to go, the challenges we must overcome and the correctives we must make so that our final victory over slavery, its various forms and its aftereffects can become a reality. On behalf of the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States, I should like to call on all of us to resolutely join our efforts to restore to humanity all of its dignity.

The Acting President: I now call on the representative of New Zealand, who will speak on behalf of the Group of Western European and Other States.

Ms. Banks (New Zealand): I have the honour today to speak on behalf of the Group of Western European and Other States on the occasion of the commemoration of the two-hundredth anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. May I thank the President for organizing this important event and express our deep gratitude to the Caribbean Community caucus of permanent representatives for leading the initiative to have the Assembly adopt a commemorative resolution.

It is now over 200 years since United States President Thomas Jefferson signed legislation on 7 March 1807 to abolish the transatlantic slave trade. The British Parliament passed legislation on 25 March 1807 prohibiting the trading of slaves throughout the British Empire. Those landmark actions signalled the beginning of the end of one of the longest and most sustained assaults on the dignity and worth of the human being in recorded history.

We gather today to recall the great human cost of the transatlantic slave trade, which saw more than 12 million people — mostly transported from West Africa to the Americas — suffer the barbaric and inhuman practice of slavery. They also had to endure the infamous Middle Passage, which history tells us claimed the lives of almost 18 per cent of those making the crossing.

As Member States of the United Nations that have solemnly pledged to reaffirm faith in the fundamental human rights and in the dignity and worth of the human person, we must never forget the tragic reality and consequences of slavery. We remember the past, even its darkest chapters, to acknowledge the human suffering and experience that is woven into the fabric of today's world. We also remember the past to avoid repeating it.

Sadly, not all the shadows of slavery have been banished. Even today, millions of our fellow human beings are subjected to practices that fall within the United Nations definition of enslavement. Sexual and debt enslavement and the forcible involvement of children in armed conflict are among the many examples of practices that hark back to the dark days of centuries past. As Member States of this institution we must be vigilant in opposing all modern-day forms of human enslavement.

Today we pause to reflect on the sufferings of those who endured slavery and to honour all those who helped to end it. Let us draw from those lessons of the past wisdom to guide our future conduct.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to the representative of the United Kingdom.

Sir Emyr Jones Parry (United Kingdom): Today is a moment for us to reflect on past actions. Today we remember millions who suffered. Twelve million Africans were loaded onto slave ships to be brought to the new world for forced labour and exploitation. Three million died en route during the horrors of that passage. A continent was torn apart. Those were acts that run against every grain of humanity, acts that remain a scar on the conscience of us all.

Today also provides an opportunity to celebrate the many who struggled to abolish the barbaric transatlantic slave trade. They included parliamentarians, slaves and former slaves, but also countless ordinary men and women from all parts of society. Their actions delivered social change that was to form the bedrock of open, tolerant and inclusive societies. We owe them an inestimable debt for leading the tireless campaign that delivered such basic human rights.

Yesterday marked 200 years since the British Parliament passed the historic 1807 Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, the result of an 18-year campaign by the British parliamentarian William Wilberforce. Twenty-five years later the Slavery Abolition Act was enacted, finally giving freedom to all slaves within the then British Empire. As Prime Minister Blair has said,

> "This bicentenary offers us a chance not just to say how profoundly shameful the slave trade was — how we condemn its existence utterly and praise those who fought for its abolition — but also to express our deep sorrow that it ever happened, that it ever could have happened, and to rejoice at the different and better times we live in today".

A national service to mark the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade will be held in the presence of Her Majesty the Queen at Westminster Abbey in London tomorrow. Representatives from many of the countries most affected by the slave trade will attend. That service is one in a series of events that the United Kingdom, working with other countries, has planned throughout 2007 across the world to commemorate the abolition. We welcome the opportunity the commemoration provides to share our histories and learn from each other's experience.

The United Kingdom thanks the members of the Caribbean Group for their leadership in bringing forward last year's General Assembly resolution that established today's commemoration. We were honoured to join as a sponsor of that resolution because we have a duty to ensure that the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade are never forgotten.

While we meet here this morning, the United Nations Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery is being officially launched in the United Kingdom's House of Lords — because today's commemoration must also serve to remind us of how, 200 years later, so much more remains to be done to abolish the forms of slavery that continue to exist today in many parts of the world. Eliminating bonded labour, the forced recruitment of child soldiers and the trafficking of human beings requires the same commitment and determination today that was demonstrated by abolitionists 200 years ago. But it requires that commitment on a global scale and with the determination of the whole international community.

In 1937 William Prescott, a former slave, said:

"They will remember that we were sold but not that we were strong. They will remember that we were bought but not that we were brave".

Today we must prove those words wrong. We must never forget their strength or their bravery. We must remember that slavery and honour their memory. In so doing, we must commit to ensure that no living man, woman or child can be subjected to the barbarism of modern slavery.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to the representative of the United States, who will speak in his capacity as representative of the host country.

Mr. Miller (United States of America): Here at the United Nations we are all too often called together to address tragedies and injustice throughout the world. It is all too rare that we come together to celebrate and acknowledge an achievement. Today we are here to commemorate, and to celebrate, the end of one of the darkest chapters of human history.

For more than three centuries, the transatlantic slave trade defiled a continent and a people. We gather here today to honour and remember its victims — the millions of unknown souls who suffered, died and have now been lost to history. We can never allow their tragedy to be forgotten.

We also gather to honour and praise the courageous individuals who risked their lives and fortunes to bring this barbaric trade to an end — individuals willing to put morality ahead of personal gain and shine a glaring and unforgiving light into the moral abyss that was the transatlantic slave trade.

The struggle of mankind is a struggle against sin and injustice. All too often we fail in that struggle. When we succeed, it is profoundly important that we celebrate our personal and collective victories. The year 1807 was a moment — really the culmination of an era — when men and women recognized the wickedness in their midst and said "this must stop".

The voices of the victims of the transatlantic slave trade, and of those that brought about its end, still echo here today, and their actions set a precedent that we must not ignore. In 2007, we face our own moral challenges, and they are not so different from those faced by our ancestors. Two hundred years after the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, slavery and the trafficking in human beings persist in many forms and in many parts of the world. At this very moment, an estimated 12.3 million people are enslaved in forced or bonded labour or sexual servitude. The purchase and sale of human beings was not then, is not now, and never can be acceptable.

Wherever men and women suffer violence, deprivation or injustice, we share the tragedy and the responsibility. Nowhere is that more clear than here in this house, the United Nations, dedicated to the well-being of all the people of the world. We cannot trumpet the moral awakening of the nineteenth century and ignore the tragic victims of the twenty-first. So while it is right to celebrate this anniversary of this historic event, as civilized people and nations, we have work to do.

When future generations look back at the early twenty-first century, I hope it will be with pride. I hope that like those whose memories we celebrate here today, we will be viewed as a people who stood up for what is right and who did everything in our power to fight evil and injustice

The Acting President: Before proceeding further, I would like to consult Member States about inviting the Mr. Rex Nettleford, Professor and Vice-Chancellor Emeritus of the University of the West Indies, Jamaica, to make a statement for this occasion.

If there is no objection, make I take it that it is the wish of the General Assembly, without setting a precedent, to invite the Honourable Rex Nettleford, Professor and Vice-Chancellor Emeritus of the University of the West Indies, Jamaica, to make a statement at this special commemorative meeting?

It was so decided.

The Acting President: In accordance with the decision just taken, I now give the floor to Mr. Rex Nettleford, Professor and Vice-Chancellor Emeritus of the University of the West Indies, Jamaica.

Mr. Nettleford: I come from that part of the Americas — otherwise known as the Caribbean — that is arguably the living laboratory of the dynamism of the encounters between Africa and Europe on foreign soil, and of both of these with the Native American who had inhabited the real estate of the Americas time out of mind, during periods of conquest and dehumanization, along with the corresponding process of struggle and resistance. For these purposes, north-east Brazil with its iconic centre in Bahia and New Orleans and all of that eastern littoral of North America

referred to as Plantation America constitute, along with the island Caribbean, the geo-cultural area that houses a civilization with its own inner logic and inner consistency.

That later arrivals came into the Caribbean after the abolition first of the trade in enslaved Africans and later of slavery itself did not save them from labour exploitation. But those new arrivals did enter as free men and women into a society that by then had the promise of decency and civility informing human, if not an altogether humane, society. That society was made distinctive by the catalytic role played by the African Presence — capital A, capital P — in social formation within a psychic universe a great part of which has been plunged into subterranean and submarine silence — to mix a metaphor.

Mixed metaphors are, in any case, masks to hide real visages, audible decibels to mask the ultrasound, or mute buttons to impose that threatening silence that Jimmy Cliff, the reggae superstar and talented lyricist of Jamaica, characteristically described thus:

> "You stole my history
> Destroyed my culture
> Cut out my tongue
> So I can't communicate
> Then you mediate
> And separate
> Hide my whole way of life
> So, myself I should hate."

It is fitting that ones like us in the Caribbean of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) should be concerned with breaking the silence — that second-most-powerful act of oppression that the African Presence in the Americas has suffered for the past 500 years, along the Slave Route, which UNESCO has wisely placed on its agenda of concerns — with a resolve to have action follow intention through efforts like this very special Assembly of the parent body. Such are the acts that define the journey by those who, having been severed from ancestral homelands, suffered in exile on plantations but survived and continue to struggle beyond survival.

The quest for delivery to humanity of the truth of what has evolved over the past half a millennium is all part of the exercise. It is a form of coordinated social action and an effective way of tackling what has been arguably the greatest scourge of modern life. I refer to that which may well have been the culmination of some four centuries of obscenities perpetrated in the pursuit of material gain, fuelled by greed and the lust for power, often under the guise of carrying out a civilizing mission said to be divinely ordained and even earlier sanctified by papal edict.

The fight for land space leading to wars and rumours of wars over time started with the occupation of newly "discovered" spaces, which we know were there before the Genoan wanderer and his marauding successors, armed with papal papers, claimed the Americas. It continued with the enslavement of millions torn from ancestral hearths and bulk-loaded across the Atlantic.

That was followed by the systematic dehumanization of a horrendously exploited labour force in the production of commodities for commercial profit, as well as by the psychological conditioning of millions into stations of self-contempt, bolstered by an enduring racism and an underlying rigid class differentiation and culminating in habitual violations of human rights. These are but a few of the blots on human history that have left all of us legacies of the deepest concern in the context of humankind's journey into the twenty-first century.

However, there are other legacies — legacies that are relegated to silence, but which in stubborn defiance speak, often through the intangible heritage of non-verbal communication, to the invincibility of the human spirit against all odds; to the ability of the human mind to exercise its intellect and imagination creatively for the advancement of human knowledge and aesthetic sensibility; to the refinement of ideas about individual rights and collective freedom, giving rise to civil society and democratic governance; and to the exploration of the learning process, to produce in human beings higher levels of tolerance in dealing with one another other, manifested in mutual respect, human dignity and caring and compassion, despite temptations to embrace selfishness, dissembling and even strong doses of mean-spiritedness, evident among ones like us.

The contribution of the African Presence to all this is without hubris or rancour. It is deserving of bold assertion, supported, to be sure, by painstaking investigation, critical analysis and decisive, programmed dissemination — all part of the mission of UNESCO's Slave Route Project.

For all of us who tenant the Americas are the creatures of that awesome process of "becoming" consequent on the historic encounters between diverse cultures from both sides of the Atlantic, in circumstances that, for all their negative manifestations, have forged tolerance out of hate and suspicion, unity within diversity, and peace out of conflict and hostility. The ongoing struggle by those who seek recognition and status in human terms demands from all with the gift of knowledge and insight the commitment of self in the continuing development of all of humankind. For stronger than war, which dehumanizes, humiliates and destroys, is indeed the love of life. The African Presence on the Route continues to speak of those gone, those living and those yet unborn — a celebratory incantation of a philosophy of life and of the hope in despair which has sustained survival and beyond in defiance of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery.

What we have learned from history has sharpened our insights about ourselves in the process of cross-fertilization, which is the great art of humankind's "becoming" out of the dynamism of the synthesizing of contradictions. For this is the story of Africa in the Americas for the past half a millennium. This, from ancient times to this day — lest we forget — is indeed the source and stuff of great literature, great art and great social structures, of sturdy crucibles of human understanding, of great intellectual achievement in science and the humanities. All of this has taken place along the Slave Route of which we speak, and it has taken place, indeed, despite the stubborn persistence of the rules of representation which decree the denigration of things African as well as a debilitating racism against all who carry the "stain" of Africa in their veins.

Lest we forget, that presence — that African Presence — informed the ancestral pedigree of ancient Greece and Rome, which Western civilization has hijacked into its history with monopolistic fervour. In that Mediterranean crossroads civilization, the treasures of cross-fertilization gave to humanity the sort of creative energy which guaranteed humankind's capacity to live, to die and to live again. Within historical memory, we again see that presence playing its catalytic role in the Iberian peninsula, when the cross-pollination of cultures — the one from Africa included — gave rise to an expansiveness of thought that resulted in the so-called discovery of the Americas and our own flowering, to this day, into the vital source of "crossroads" energy that this hemisphere has been for modern humanity.

The enslaved and colonized Americas provided, as it were, a new arena for experimentation in human exploitation, admittedly, but it was the relegation of hordes of humanity to the margins of silence that was to render the Americas more impoverished than they might well have been. Thanks, however, to the resistance of those who would be silenced, the vitality and energy of the hemisphere was to benefit. Neither total physical expulsion nor ethnic cleansing was possible — since both modes of liquidation would have been unprofitable for slave owners and metropolitan masters — and therefore the African presence continues to make an impact where it most matters, in the enduring areas of language, religion, artistic manifestations and even kinship patterns, as well as in the areas of ontology and cosmology, rooted in the creative diversity that is now the global reality of the third millennium, and, in fact, has been the lived reality of the Caribbean and the wider Americas, of which, of course, the Caribbean is an iconic, integral part.

That is something that invites understanding and acknowledgement from the countries of modern Europe, which have been colonized in reverse, and their extension, white North America, where homogeneity has been considered a virtue among the power structures but which is now threatened by heterogeneity following the breakdown of geographical boundaries, with the advent of migrant hordes of a different hue, as well as a textured sensibility via galactic spheres. But, alas, the legacy of slavery and its fertilizing of a trade in African labour continues.

I agree with the notion that there comes a time when the past ceases to be an alibi, and that, at the turn of the twentieth century, we had surely reached that point. But what I cannot agree with is the shrouding of critical elements such as the brutality of the trade in enslaved Africans in a silence that would deny to hordes of humanity the fullest possible participation in all discourse attempting to define, determine and delineate the destiny of said hordes of humanity, long relegated in that past to stations of humiliation, would-be psychic despair and non-personhood. Indeed, those who dare to ignore their history are doomed to repeat it. The UNESCO Slave Route Project, in helping to prevent this, is clearly designed to identify all the deep

social and cultural forces which have successfully conspired to prevent any such repetition, at least on the scale of that past, or to deny history and people like us the long memory of that past. Hence the CARICOM Caribbean's deep involvement in the operations of the Slave Route Project ever since its inception in 1994, continuing today in its revitalized and restructured form. That vision is what now, fortuitously, brings us here this morning to challenge the validity of such past obscenities.

I have long had reason to address such obscenities elsewhere, in the context of the responsibilities of the African diaspora, which has helped to seminally shape the Americas but which is still being denied its historic and historical role in the growth and development of this hemisphere and elsewhere.

The African diaspora cries out for recognition and status in the new dispensation that goes by the name of globalization, which, from our perspective in the Caribbean — the ex-slave, post-colonial Caribbean — threatens to be a calculus of inequality rather than an opportunity to make a last dash towards universal human dignity and individual freedom in praxis.

Such dignity and freedom in praxis must continue to be on the agenda of concerns and positive action for the African diaspora in the new millennium. Crossing the boundary of thought to programmes of action that will benefit the millions that tenant the African diaspora is itself an imperative. Hence the need to incorporate designs for social living and a positive sense of self into the mainstream development strategies of the newly globalized world. The aim for diasporic Africa must be to help determine the mainstream, not merely to float along with the currents wherever they may take us.

One twenty-first century challenge for the African diaspora, therefore, is to have the new globalization veer away from inherited obscene habits of the racialized division of the world into the rich industrialized North and the poor non-Caucasian South — the developed civilized world versus the two-thirds underdeveloped world, misnomered the third world. That that is best done by the manifestation of achievement through the diaspora's exercise of the creative intellect and creative imagination is impatient of debate. But it must help replace the Cartesian-driven thought system that declares that any show of emotion is a decline from thinking to feeling with the diasporic reality that genuine creativity and intellectual rigour are not mutually exclusive and that the harmonization of the two may well be the hope of a third-millennium world.

The abolition of the trade for all reasons — including those outlined by the Caribbean scholar Eric Williams in his seminal *Capitalism and Slavery* — could not help but facilitate the re-humanization of the offspring of the millions involuntarily and inhumanely lured or dragged from West Africa and the Congo across the Middle Passage. As the African diaspora has long known, the mind can be a passionate organ, too.

This is arguably a main point of reparation advocacy, which is by no means seeking a hand-out of £500 per person to descendants of the oppressed, but, rather, positing serious investment by countries that have been enriched by the heinous crime of the slave trade and slavery, investment in the human-resource development of countries that suffered — preferably through the education and preparation of their young, so as to enable them to cope with the inheritance of a continuing unjust world. Above all, they should be able to understand their own history and help plug the knowledge gap, which the representative of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines so eloquently emphasized in last November's General Assembly debate. As a well-known African proverb goes, "Until the lions have their own historians, tales of the hunt will always glorify the hunter".

To cross the boundaries of hate, intolerance, discrimination, racial arrogance, class exclusivity, intellectual snobbery and cultural denigration, which constitute the legacy of that horrific past, the African diaspora must continue with its time-worn strategies of demarginalization, reinforcing the intensity of the creative work in the expansion of the communication arts serving humankind. Caribbean Kweyol, Sranan Tonga of Suriname, and Jamaica Talk all legitimately speak to the African diasporic reality and help to substitute a voice for the imposed silence of oppression.

The choice of one's creator — whether it be the Jah of the Rastafarians, Pentecostal versions of Jesus, African-American versions of Mohammed and Islam, the Orishas of Cuba's Santeria, Brazil's Candomblé, Trinidad's Shango or the Oguns of Haitian voodoo — must insist on the legitimacy accorded Christian and

other orthodoxies, in the spirit of that ecumenism that has forced the ritual of apology from Rome to Judaism and that has the Graeco-Judaeo-Christian religious-cultural complex acknowledging the rightful existence of Hinduism, Buddhism and Shintoism, the great religions of the East. Heterogeneity as a guiding principle of human organization is here the desired framework for peace — global, regional and local.

The gift of the grasp of the plurality and intertextuality of existence — although not exclusive to the African diaspora — is the primary feature of that experience. The twenty-first century and the new millennium could, through the accessibility by each segment of planet Earth to every other at a moment's notice by way of the electronic media, benefit tremendously from such sense and sensibility, so as to fulfil the millennium's hopes for peace, security and the improvement of the social capital. Can the world without anguish accept itself as part this, part that, part the other, but totally human, without one part of it trying to dominate the other? The idea of the Caribbean person being part African, part European, part Asian, part Native American, but totally Caribbean, is still a mystery to many in the North Atlantic, which has been spoiled by the hegemonic control that it has had over empires and far-away real estate for half a millennium — with the indulgences of the trade in slaves, slavery and colonialism all acting in tandem.

It is the full grasp of the creative diversity of all of humankind that provides the source of tolerance, generosity of spirit, forgiveness and respect for the other that the new millennium will require if it is to house the brave new world, with the human being as centre of the cosmos. That is also the source of the patience which is needed for the human-scale development that all the grand objectives of United Nations declarations envision. That patience is honed in the habit of the African diasporic tenants, who have had to negotiate their space over time and to find form on a playing field that has never been level — not since 1492, when Spain's Cristóbal Colón lost his way to Japan; not since 1562, when England's John Hawkins traded some surrogate beasts of burden — enslaved Africans — to the Spanish West Indies; not since 1807, when a mix of capitalistic self-interest and humanitarian impulse drove the British Parliament to enact the first step on the journey to restore decency to human life and living.

The African diaspora is, for this reason, more than equipped to enter the dialogue among civilizations, having seeded the germ of a civilization itself, as if with the beneficence of retributive justice. Such dialogue, after all, is all about the quest for peace, tolerance, justice, liberty, sustainable development, trust, respect and human understanding, and should not be seen as a threat but rather as a guarantee for peace.

Yet, even while I recommend this to our African diaspora and to the world as the guarantee of a safe and meaningful future, the experience of ages drives me back to some wise words uttered on 28 February 1968, which have been immortalized in the Bob Marley musical setting ironically entitled "War" even while it hankers after peace:

> "Until the philosophy which holds one race superior and another inferior is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned ...
>
> "Until the colour of a man's skin is of no more significance than the colour of his eyes ...
>
> "Until the basic human rights are equally guaranteed to all without regard to race ...
>
> "Until that day ... the dreams of lasting peace, world citizenship, rule of international morality will remain but a fleeting illusion to be pursued but never attained".

Such are the many boundaries left by the slave trade and slavery. Many rivers are indeed yet to be crossed, to take us all over to the right side of history and away from the obscenities of the slave trade and of slavery, as well as from the vile consequences that continue to plague far too much of humankind, depriving us all of decency and threatening our innate humanity.

The Acting President: On behalf of the President of the General Assembly, I would like to thank all of those who have taken part in this important commemoration today. In particular, I should like to thank Prime Minister Denzil Douglas of Saint Kitts and Nevis, for coming to New York to speak on behalf of the Caribbean Community; the chairpersons of the regional groups, for their eloquent statements; the representatives of the United Kingdom and the host country; the key speaker, Professor Rex Nettleford; and, of course, the wonderful performance by the African drummers of the group Sing Sing Rhythm,

from Senegal, which reminded us of the great contribution that Africa has made to the world.

Our gathering today is a confirmation of our common commitment to end slavery anywhere and everywhere. It is a cause that we can all stand up for. In memory of all those who suffered under the yolk of slavery, we must rise to the challenges we face today, for the well-being of all humankind.

In its modern guises — such as bonded and child labour and the forced recruitment of child soldiers — the unspeakable cruelty of the past persists today. Through this commemoration, I hope that the global community can come to terms with the injustices of the past but, also, that this will make us all the more resolute in our determination to end all modern-day manifestations of slavery, in particular the scourge that is the trafficking in human beings.

I would now like to introduce the finale to today's commemoration, a New York-based choir whose members come from many different Caribbean countries. The members of the Independence Choir, directed by Lloyd Chung, symbolize the unity and humanity of this city. I hope the Assembly will enjoy the performance.

The Assembly heard a musical performance.

The Acting President: I would like to thank the Independence Choir for its moving performance.

The General Assembly has thus concluded the commemoration of the two-hundredth anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade.

May I take it that the General Assembly decides to conclude its consideration of agenda item 155?

It was so decided.

Programme of work

The Acting President: I would like to remind members that, as announced in today's *Journal*, following the adjournment of this commemorative meeting, the General Assembly will hold its 90th plenary meeting, in order to consider a report of the Fifth Committee.

May I announce that a panel discussion on the theme "The transatlantic slave trade: the tragedy and the legacy" will be held in the Trusteeship Council Chamber at 3 p.m. today.

The meeting rose at 12.25 p.m.